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ABSTRACT

The problem with the G. I. Bill is that some veterans enroll in school, start collecting their monthly stipends, do not attend classes but keep on collecting. The Veterans Administration is trying to protect federal funds and is trying to stop the cheating, but it may not be doing the right thing. The real problem is seen to be more complex, reflecting the whole state of education in that it forces examination of the system of determining progress of a student. Various difficulties in determining such progress are described, including the reliance on class attendance figures. Implications for the colleges themselves are discussed. Similar problems for vocational Schools are addressed. It is concluded that the V.A. is not doing much to advance the cause of education: no research, no new products, no new techniques, and reducing counseling services for veterans. (LBH)

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The Unbalanced Two-Step:

Standards of Progress for the G.I. Bill

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Dr. Arnstein's views are his own and should not be attributed to the National Advisory Council on Education Professions Development. In 1973 he participated in Educational Assistance to Veterans: A Comparative Study of Three G.I. Bills (Princeton: Educational Testing Service. September 1973) which has been published by both the Senate and House Committees on Veterans' Affairs.

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The Unbalanced Two-Step: Standards of Progress for the G. I. Bill

George Arnstein

The current problem is relatively simple: Some veterans enroll in school, start collecting their monthly stipends under the G.I. Bill, do not attend classes but keep on collecting. They are cheating themselves out of the training a grateful citizenry bestowed on them, and they are ripping off those same taxpayers by cheating.

The Veterans Administration, as a conscientious Federal agency, is trying to protect the Federal funds entrusted to it and is trying to stop the cheating. The problem is that the V.A. may or may not be doing the right thing in its well intentioned steps.

The real problem is much more complex and it reflects on the whole state of education because it forces us -- or should force us -- to examine our system of determining progress of a student. The basic law, the G.I. Bill rather reasonably says that a veteran, to use his* eligibility, must first of all have an educational or vocational objective (38 USC 1791) and second, must make reasonable progress toward that objective. The real problem is that we have no reliable means of determining that progress. We

*"His" only rarely means "hers." The references to males are deliberate.

give out grades, and we check attendance. We count hours, units and other little marks on formerly white paper, but we do not really know how to measure progress.

This whole business currently is one of the hottest topics in all of education: Instead of relying on traditional input measures, can we switch to output measures? Translated into English: Instead of counting units or hours, instead of awarding a Bachelor's degree after the usual 120 Carnegie units (or whatever), instead of relying on the number of credits or hours we have put into the student, can we instead measure his performance, can we measure his output, his competence and accordingly issue him a diploma or certificate?

The movement goes under a variety of names: Performance-based education, criterion-referenced instruction, competency-based testing. All have in common the notion that we ought to look at what a person is able to do instead of asking the traditional question of how many hours he has sat in Spanish II or Physics I.

Obviously and clearly this is the way to measure progress. Less obviously and less clearly, this is much easier to advocate than to execute. In practice it is so difficult that it explains why we continue to use the traditional system of input measures and why we are making slow progress toward output measures. Just why it is so difficult I cannot explain in the 15 minutes allocated to me on the program but I will offer one clue:: It is

easier to measure performance on manual skills and certain operational skills than it is to measure performance in conceptual and abstract disciplines and areas. In fact there is a spectrum which begins with a typical examination for driver's licenses where you actually have to drive around the block to demonstrate your competence, and which ends with abstract areas of human endeavor where there are no tests and no standardized performance criteria.

As for the simple problem of the V.A. which has been relying primarily on two things to determine satisfactory progress. Is the veteran getting decent grades and is he regular in his attendance? If yes, he stays on the G.I. Bill; if no, then he should be dropped. (38 USC 1784).

That's how we got to the regulations issued in 1975 in which the V.A. said that the school must notify the V.A. as soon as a veteran has stopped attending classes. The V.A. did not say that the schools must take regular daily attendance, but some V.A. regional offices so interpreted the rule and so did some State approval agencies which administer much of this business for the Federal Veterans Administration which is enjoined from exerting Federal control over education. (38 USC 1782).

The colleges and universities were unhappy about this new regulation, especially those colleges which have not been taking attendance and which now thought that they had to take attendance. One university president said that his school had graduate students who sometimes went into the library stacks and reappeared only three months later, that surely he was not expected to keep track of them daily.

I fear that I am not entirely sympathetic to the resistance shown by the colleges and that's why this presentation cryptically refers to the "Unbalanced Two-Step," a dance which is currently being performed rather badly. Every school, every college which enrolls veterans has been certifying for years, as applicable, that the veteran is enrolled in a proper course of study and that he is making progress toward his stated objective (which he cannot change except by permission of the Veterans Administration or the State Approval Agency). No college, to my knowledge, has ever complained about this arrangement which launches the monthly subsistence payments. No college has said that this intrudes on academic freedom or that this means Federal interference. Now that the Veterans Administration has a regulation which says -- as I read it -- that the college must take the second step in this mysterious dance, the colleges are objecting. Surely the person who certified as to original enrollment and progress toward an objective also may rely on the same data to determine whether a veteran has stopped making progress and should so notify the V.A. That makes the unbalanced one-step a balanced two-step and I think that's a pretty good idea.

Of course, the college has been collecting $3 per veteran for years as a processing fee and it sure would be nice if the V.A. now also paid $3 for processing the second form, on the grounds that it is putting a new burden on the schools, and on the grounds that it would like better performance. That makes sense and that's what colleges ought to ask for, in my opinion.

The problem for vocational schools is very similar, except that they have been taking rather more regular attendance in the first place because non-degree students have always been measured by clock hours rather than Carnegie units.

I have one more thought for the Veterans Administration which is running the largest and oldest program of student financial aid in the United States. The V.A. is doing just about nothing to advance the cause of education, not even educational administration. The V.A. had been in the forefront but gave up its leadership: It did more for counseling than almost anybody in the months and years immediately after World War II (38 USC 1697). It gave birth to the Occupational Outlook Handbook, a most valuable biennial document which has long since been transferred to the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the Department of Labor and which is being used by thousands of high school counselors.

Those were the good old days when the Veterans Administration exerted leadership in education and produced innovations (before the word became so terribly fashionable). In recent years the V.A. has not done a damned thing to advance education -- no research, no new products, no new techniques, and it even has cut back on the counseling it used to provide for veterans. It is almost as if the V.A. has forgotten that the original name of the G.I. Bill was the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944. Note the word: Readjustment.

The Veterans Administration still pays for medical research but in education research it has rolled over and played dead. It has become a mere check writing machine and I think that's too bad. I am not finding fault because I do not know whether the decision was made by the Congress or the White House or the V.A., and I do not even know when it was made, but it certainly has been effective in causing us to lose a forward thrust from which I personally benefited as part of my readjustment to becoming a peacetime civilian with a chance at an education.